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ABSTRACT

"Teaching for the moment," an approach to teaching English as a second language (ESL), is described. In addition to using nonclassroom moments to expose students to language discovery, this approach involves changing instructional materials to get to the students' level of language and experiential development. It also involves taking advantage of each situation as a potential learning experience within the classroom. For example, a bird flying into an open window in the classroom was used to present continuous tenses to describe what the bird was doing at various times. Teachers can provide variety in the classroom learning experience by using different teaching methods, including audiolingual, silent way, suggestopedia, counseling learning, and total physical response approaches. When students in the ESL classroom are having difficulty with some aspect of the language in the middle of a lesson, the teacher may teach the corrections on the spot. Specific ways to improve interest in ESL instruction and make it relevant to the students' environment may include using Mother Goose nursery rhymes to teach comprehension and culture or simple line drawings (droodles) to elicit oral responses from students. The need for teachers to know where language resources exist, and implications for teacher trainers, curriculum writers, and program directors are briefly addressed. (SW)

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From John R. Boyd and John F. Haskell, eds., "Selected Papers from the Tenth Illinois TESOL/BE Annual Convention (Chicago, IL, Feb 26-27, 1982)

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EYE-OPENERS FOR ESL TEACHERS*

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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Are you tired of Using the same "old" ESL textbooks: Are your students bored with the same routines of your ESL instruction? Has your ESL program lost its momentum to meet the needs of your institution, company, or community? If your answer to any of the above is "yes", you should try "TM". TM is a mild mental diarhetic, which opens clogged cranial cavities, disperses depressing doldrums in minutes, and speeds you on your way to an enriched ESL class or program, which stimulates students who have gone stale.

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What is TM? No, it's not Transcendental Meditation, although you may want to use that to tranquilize frayed nerves resulting from classes which are always increasing and decreasing in size without advanced warning, deadlines which seem to stack up on one another, increased responsibilities without much remuneration (e.g., a full-time instead of a part-time position, a salary commensurate with one's peers, or certification), and cutbacks in funding which threaten not only one's position, but the entire program. It's not Theragran M either, although that may give you energy to keep pace with ever-maddening schedules, endless series of meetings, and the multitude of unexpected problems associated with teaching and working with foreign students.

It's "Teach for the Moment". What is "Teach for the Moment"? It's an idea, a suggestion, a seed, which when planted in the mind has the potential of changing one's attitude about what, how, when, and probably most important, why one teaches ESL. When fully developed, TM can change the course of your ESL program. It may even change how one prepares students (or repairs teachers) for teaching English to speakers of other languages. Yes, teacher trainers, this is for you, not just teachers. In fact, TM is for program directors, curriculum developers, and even materials writers, especially those who write for publishing companies. Knowing that "Teach for the Moment" is and how it works can help all of you.

I discovered this little energizer when I was teaching ESL in a multilingual/multicultural program at the Martin Luther King Elementary School in Urbana, Illinois a few years ago. Since I was teaching in a "pull-out" situation, I used to walk my students from their regular classroom to my ESL classroom. (Forgive me, those of you who are still teaching in closets, hallways, and stairwells, but I was fortunate to have my own classroom, to have a principal who understood the value of ESL instruction.) One day, it occurred to me that the time spent in the hallway going from one classroom to another was an excellent time to teach language. I discovered that I could teach directions for walking down the hall and introduce the names of rooms and teachers (and other school personnel) in those rooms we passed along the way. After a while, my students began to give the same directions to each other. I began to "teach for the moment".

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* Regardless of what association we have with teaching English to speakers of other languages--whether as tutors, teachers, supervisors, curriculum designers, teacher trainers, consultants, or program directors, we are all teachers. The author uses ESL to include EFL, ESOL, ESP, EAP, and Bilingual Education, including bilingual vocational programs.

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An interesting coincidence is that I was bored with my instruction at the time. Can you imagine how my students felt? I am reminded of a speech Mary Finocchiaro delivered to the Defense Language Institute in March, 1974, in which she considered the ESL teacher to be the "crucial variable" in teaching English to speakers of other languages. She discussed the things that teachers are expected to do, the qualities of a well-designed curriculum, and the characteristics of superior teachers.[1] Implicit in her comments is the idea that a teacher's attitude toward his instruction and his students tremendously influences the quality of learning that takes place. Carrying this ideas further, the attitude a program director, a curriculum writer, or a teacher trainer has toward his program and the community affects the final product. Educators, therefore, need to be constantly aware of what they do, why they do it, and the impact all of this has on their students, the program, and the community.

Anyway, I discovered that the classroom could be (in fact, needed to be) expanded beyond the walls of Room 12. The school playground became an excellent source for language discovery and use since my students were exposed to their English-speaking peers from whom they learned lots of language during recess, lunch time, in other classes, and after school. This language was not being taught in my ESL class, but it was important to my students; it met their social needs. My classroom, therefore, became a language monitoring center in addition to a language instruction center. And, believe me, some of the language those children learned needed monitoring.

My students needed to learn the simple past tense so that they could talk about how they cut their fingers, scraped their chins, or skinned their knees. And that wasn't scheduled to be taught until Lesson 17 of Book Two. They needed to talk about the fight on the playground, which continued on the bus after school. They needed to tell me about how they made a new friend, how they scored the winning run in baseball or the winning goal in soccer, and how they found a rabbit or a bird or a butterfly in the hedgerow at the back of the school yard.

I soon became aware that the textbook I was using wasn't teaching enough English, the kind of English my students needed to learn. It wasn't "teaching for the moment". So, I expanded my ESL materials to include ESL programs from six publishing companies, keeping one as the core instructional program for my class. I also used regular classroom materials to supplement the other instruction.

"Teaching for the moment" began to have a new meaning for me. Whereas earlier it meant that I had to become aware of those moments when I had contact with my students but was not actually teaching them (in a formal sense) and could take advantage of mutual experiences within that contact time for language instruction, now I had to change my instructional materials so that I could get to the point in language and experiential development where my students were, if not to a point beyond so that I could keep one step ahead of them. Teachers need to be aware of the resources around them in school and in the community. By resources, I mean more than instructional materials. Teachers need to sit in on other classes in their school to listen to the language which is used there. They need to go to the shop, the home economics class, and classes where other subjects are taught. The need to observe the language in use at

the employment office, in factories and stores, and at the supermarket. At each location, they need to make lists of vocabulary items and sentence patterns which occur in these communication situations. This is the kind of English their students need to learn and their program should teach.

I was faced with a new problem in my situation: how does one select appropriate materials? Robert Mager said in Preparing Instructional Objectives "... if you're not sure where you're going, you're liable to end up somewhere else -- and not even know it."[2] Well, my students led me somewhere else and I knew where I was (or I thought I did), but I didn't know where to go from there or how to get there. Sound familiar? Teacher trainers, are you preparing potential teachers (or repairing existing teachers) to know where they are going? Do you know where language resources exist in the community and how to collect that information? Do you know what to do with it once you have gathered it? How does one include this information into an ESL classroom? Do you know where *you* are going in your teacher training program? Curriculum writers, are you designing ESL curriculum that takes teachers and students to where they need to go? Does your curriculum help teachers to "teach for the moment"? Do teacher training programs and curricula help teachers to know where their students are in their English language development and where they need to go so that each stage of language development meets the students' experiential needs: Do teacher training programs and curricula reflect a knowledge of available ESL and other materials and how one chooses the appropriate material(s) for any given moment? Program directors, do you know where your program is going? Are you aware of resources of language use in the community, and do you know how to use that in your program whether in staff training or actual instruction? Is your program "teaching for the moment" in terms of meeting the needs of your community, your staff, and your students?

These are questions I asked myself at the time and continue to ask myself again and again. As I reviewed the materials I had selected, I realized that there were some good ideas in those textbooks and programs. The problem was that those ideas weren't all neatly packaged into one textbook or program. But then, they never are. I think that publishing companies should collect the same information about language use as has been suggested for teachers and program directors. Then, they should develop materials which include techniques for using this information in the ESL classroom. Until such time as this kind of material is developed, we have to make the best use of existing materials which are currently on the market, many of which have good ideas. JILAP, the Jacaranda Individualized Instruction Language Arts Program,[3] includes numerous communication activities, some of which require students to describe scenes to each other from opposite sides of a cardboard partition, which rises only to chin level. In these activities, one student describes a scene on a picture card while the other student tries to construct the same scene from individual pictures. The Magic of English[4] employs Rebus techniques in its reading exercises. It also includes a variety of pictures on a page and a series of sentences about each picture. The student is asked to choose the appropriate sentence for each picture. Reading, Thinking, and Writing[5] uses reading and writing exercises to help students to think critically about reading passages. I'm sure you know of other texts which have similar helpful activities. The problem is that commercial materials are very expensive. Teachers need to be trained in

using these techniques in developing their own materials. But, since teachers don't have the time to develop the kinds of materials they need, perhaps the only thing to do is to train them how to select the best ideas from existing materials.

Teachers need to understand that there are some basic concepts which are essential to all instruction. In my travels to schools throughout Indiana, I ask teachers what they think the purpose of language is. The usual answer is that language helps us to communicate. When I ask what it is that we communicate, they invariably respond that we communicate ideas, wants, and desires. Then, I persist a bit more and ask what ideas we communicate. The point here is that we teach concepts while we teach language. These are the ideas we communicate and teach. In the classroom, such concepts as "same, different, and opposite" are very useful for future instruction. Other concepts, such as "beginning, middle, and end"; "first and last"; and "before and after" are also handy. Teachers need to identify these and other basic concepts and the language associated with them and include them in their instruction. Teaching these concepts and the language associated with them will help the ESL teachers to follow a basic premise in education: teach new material by using information already learned by the students.

But, expanding the classroom and choosing the appropriate materials weren't enough to help me solve the problem of "teaching for the moment". Have you ever had those days when nothing went right? When even if you got the day started, there was no sparkle to your teaching? Have you had days in class when probably the most important (if not the only) thing taught was "Wake up!"? Of course, you have; we all have. I have seen and used little techniques which have perked up my instruction (and me). For example, there is a teacher, whom I have visited, who never takes attendance; her students do. Another teacher writes a proverb, a joke, or a tidbit of graffiti on the chalkboard for students to read on their own. Without pushing students to read them, the teacher waits for someone in class to ask about them, and she incorporates these phrases into the lesson. In doing so, the teacher expands the students' vocabulary, sentence patterns, pronunciation (in some cases), and cross-cultural understanding while she teaches.

At another site of ESL inspiration, the teacher begins the class with a small bag full of a variety of objects. He knows that he can teach "Wh-" questions, such as "what" and "where", in addition to sentence patterns and vocabulary, using curiosity as the motivating factor. The same teacher has on occasion used a "feely bag" as a technique for teaching language related to tactile senses. In these instances, he controls oral production by having the students construct sentences beginning with "It feels like...", "I think it's a..." and so on. The teacher has also used "smelly" and "tasty" bags, but I'm not sure I'd like them; I want to see what goes into my nose and onto my tongue.

Strategies for beginning a lesson are important, to be sure. But, what do you do when the lesson bogs down in the middle? Have you ever had a lesson come to a grinding stop while there was still a half-hour to forty-five minutes remaining? Sometimes this happens when a particular style or method of teaching is used too often, or when an interruption occurs outside the classroom (or within), or to problems students are having with some aspect of the English language. What do you do? Go to

your ESL medicine cabinet, take a TM, and continue. That's right, "teach for the moment". We can't always control what goes on within or outside our classrooms, so we need to take advantage of each situation as a potential learning experience. If you're accustomed to using only one method of teaching ESL, try another. Your choices include audio-lingual (mim-mem or pattern practice), silent way, suggestopedia, counseling learning, total physical response, and many others. Now, I must admit that this suggestion implies that ESL teachers actually know how to use the methods just mentioned. Teacher trainers, do the students you are preparing (or the teachers you are repairing) know how to teach ESL, using a variety of methods? Are you training them how to make use of the best features of each method in any given situation in the classroom? It seems to me that teachers need to know this as much as they need to know the same kind of information with regard to selecting materials.

Interruptions in class are, needless to say, annoying, and yet, they are unavoidable. I remember one warm day when a bird flew into an open window in my classroom. Now, we were not studying ornithology at the time, but we had studied the names of animals, present continuous tenses, and simple imperatives. So, using imperatives, I got the students calmed down and seated. Then, they used present continuous tenses to describe what the bird was doing at various times during his visit with us. And finally, they employed simple commands to help the bird exit the room.

This leads me to another comment about "teaching for the moment". Sylvia Ashton Warner[6] and Dr. Roach Van Allen are usually associated with the "language experience approach" to teaching reading. However, I am sure that Ms. Warner in her classroom and Dr. Allen in his research did not intend that this approach be used exclusively for reading. Why not use it in developing oral language skills, whether dictation exercises are used or not? It seems to me that we do not do enough talking in class as it is. Incidentally, that's what we did with the bird incident. We talked about the experience, recorded voices describing what took place, and drew pictures to accompany the tapes.

Another kind of problem occurs in the ESL classroom when students are having difficulty with some aspect(s) of the language in the middle of the lesson. This phenomenon occurs frequently in the ESL class and many times is noted mentally by the teacher (if it is not forgotten) to be included in a future lesson. But, why not teach the corrections on the spot? There's no point in moving on in a lesson if students are having problems with various features of the language, which prevent them from continuing with the lesson. Teachers need to know how to spot problems at the moment they occur in class and how to give a brief series of exercises to drill the problem(s) right then and there. Teachers, do you know how to spot problems in class? Do you know what drill exercise types to use to rectify the problem(s)? Teacher trainers, are you preparing (or repairing) teachers to do that?

A creative idea to spark enthusiasm in class is to show simple line drawings, which are commercially known as Droodles[7]. By asking students what these simple pictures represent and requiring responses to begin with "It seems like...", "It looks like..." and/or "It appears to be...", the teacher can listen for pronunciation problems with the final /-s/ while allowing ample opportunity for students to talk about things in their native cultures, which the pictures bring to mind.

Sometimes reading lessons become little more than pencil-and-paper exercises and accomplish even less in developing comprehension skills. Mother Goose nursery rhymes provide an excellent resource for teaching comprehension and culture. Before teaching by means of Mother Goose rhymes, students (especially older students) must accept that "childish" materials are being used as a means to an end. The first step is dictation, after which a word or two can be said about the proper form for a short verse (and/or other forms of writing). Students can then recopy the rhyme, if necessary, and questions can proceed about unfamiliar vocabulary items. The fun begins when students are asked to make decisions about the information contained in each rhyme.

To do this exercise, students must understand several rules. First, the verse is considered "data" for the purposes of the activity. Second, all and only the information contained in the nursery rhyme may be used to make decisions based upon statements the teacher makes about the rhyme. Students may not reach out into the real world for answers, but must stay within the confines of the "data". And finally, the information contained in the rhyme is true and not open to interpretation or question. Try this activity, asking students to respond to your statements with "True", "False" or "I can't tell (from the information in the rhyme)", and bring some life into your ESL reading class.

Another suggestion is to have your students read stories or books they have studied in class to younger students. Your students may have children or younger brothers and sisters, who would enjoy having a story read to them, and this is a good way to make your ESL instruction "real" in the community.

How do your ESL classes end? Do they come to an abrupt conclusion at the sound of the bell? Do you just stop teaching when your watch says that the class is over? One teacher I have observed builds a final activity into her lesson. The activity begins with a student designated as the "detective", who inquires "Who did it?", and someone in the class answers by using simple past tenses of verbs. The "detective" continues by asking "What did (s)he do?", "When did (s)he do it?", "Where did (s)he do it?", and "Why did (s)he do it?" as other students respond each time. The activity is most effective if the questions and answers occur in rapid succession.

At the end of an art lesson, I had students repeat the simple instructions they were asked to follow while completing the project that day. In another class, I have heard students retell the experiences in class during the day. Perhaps you have other ideas.

I have tried to open your eyes to suggestions for enlivening your ESL instruction and for making it relevant to your students' environment. The important thing to remember about "teaching for the moment" is that anytime is a good time to teach ESL. Teachers need to be trained to do that. Curricula need to reflect that. Programs need to demonstrate that in the community or institution where they exist.

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